

*The Literature of French Canada.*

By JOHN LESPERANCE, M. A.

(Read May 28, 1883.)

I shall perhaps be taxed with exaggeration when I state that the maintenance of the French-Canadian race in the full force of their homogeneity, since the Conquest, is one of the most remarkable phenomena of modern times. Yet such is my deliberate judgment. When we consider the disintegrating influences of altered political institutions, the bewilderment and discouragement brought on by a total change of social conditions, the rankling sense of inferiority that defeat, surrender and military occupation inevitably induce, and the resistless sweep of Anglo-Saxon speech and commercial domination on this Continent, the wonder may well be that this people have continued to exist at all. But they have continued to exist. Nay, they have flourished. Not only have they increased and multiplied within their original borders, but they have spread from East to West, leaving the literal imprint of their footsteps on the geographical chart of America, from New England to the base of the Rocky Mountains, and all over the Mississippi Valley. Nor did their progress stop there. Not content with physical advancement, they went further and founded a literary microcosm of their own. To me this a greater marvel than the material fact of their preservation, and I have taken such an interest therein, that I venture to make it the text of a brief memoir before the Royal Society.

It is, indeed, altogether fitting that a representative body like ours should take cognizance of such a subject, being imbued with the principle laid down by Dr. Johnson, that however much statesmen and soldiers may achieve for the renown of their native land, the chief glory of a country lies with its authors.

I.

ORATORS.

I find little trace of intellectual activity from the downfall of Quebec in 1759 till about 1820. The oldest inhabitants had not recovered from the blow to their destinies, and the rising generations were only gradually reconciling themselves to the new order of things. But toward the latter period there was a general awakening to a policy of self-assertion, grounded on the idea of French-Canadian autonomy, as a resultant from a strict interpretation of the Treaty of Paris. This sentiment was manifested in the establishment of one or two militant papers, and in strong appeals from the Legislative Assembly. Several valiant tribunes of pen and speech then arose in the persons of the two Papineaus, Taschereau, Blanchet, Bedard, Panet, Vallieres de St. Real, Bourdages, Denis-Benjamin Viger, Bibaud and Parent. I group these together for the sake of classification, although

their services extended promiscuously over a term of five and twenty years. They have the further advantage of giving me a starting point and enabling me to trace the origin of French-Canadian literature to its orators. Papineau stands *facile princeps* among these. His contemporaries describe him as a Mirabeau, both in variety of learning and the higher gifts of voice, gesture and inspiration. His speeches have unfortunately not been preserved, but from the scraps that have reached us, we may easily account for the admiration of those who enjoyed the advantage of hearing him either in the halls of Parliament or in the immense uprisings that led to the rebellion of 1837-38. Since those days, Papineau has had a long train of brilliant disciples. Chief among them is the Hon. P. J. O. Chauveau, Vice-President of our Society. M. Chauveau is essentially an academic orator, accurately rhetorical, delicate in feeling, judiciously impassioned and a through stylist. His panegyric of the Braves who fell at the battle of Ste. Foye, in 1760, is a masterpiece, worthy of the place it has long held in the various collections of elegant extracts. I have only space to mention next the Lafontaines, Morins, Papins, Laberges, Dorions, Lorangeurs and Labreches. These all flourished in the eventful days from 1848 to 1867. In our own time the traditions of oratory have not been lost. The Province of Quebec can boast to-day of two born orators such as are not surpassed in any part of the Dominion, nor in any period of the country's history. I refer to Chapleau and Laurier. I have heard some of the illustrious masters of speech in the United States and Europe and can safely say that, in natural gifts, none of them appear to me to excel either of the two orators whom I have just mentioned. In a larger sphere, and before audiences that would afford an ampler measure of publicity, both of them would achieve a continental reputation. Mercier is not far behind, and he is followed by a long line of young speakers, such as Charland, Christin, Tremblay, Poirier, Cornellier, Thibault and others who are training for eminent positions in the parliamentary career.

The circumstances of the Roman Catholic system in French Canada are particularly favorable to the development of pulpit oratory, and it is easy to enumerate such distinguished preachers as the Racines, Colins, Martineaus, Levesques, Hamons, Paquets, Bruchesi, Bélangers, Légarés and Beaudoins.

I know of no better school for the youthful student of oratory than the sacred tribune, where, as at the feet of Gamaliel, he may learn from men of deep scholarship the art of combining the graces of elocution with appropriate erudition and logical sequence of thought. This union is the more to be sought after, as, notwithstanding my admiration for our French orators, I am bound to confess that they too frequently rely on natural advantages, to the neglect of serried argument and learned illustration.

## II.

### HISTORIANS AND BIOGRAPHERS.

There is no department of literature that presupposes more intellectual vigor in a young country than that of history and biography. Happy is the people that has a history of its own to be written and a historian of its own to write it. French Canada has both. Considering the circumstances under which it was written, and the resources at his command, Garneau's history is a remarkable performance, constituting an epoch. It is a monument both to the man and to the land, and Garneau's son has fulfilled at once a

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filial and patriotic duty in issuing a new edition, with an introduction from the pen of M. Chauveau. With broader means of information, and working on a different plane, Ferland followed in the wake of Garneau, producing a work of invaluable importance, unfortunately left incomplete by the author's premature death. The two works supplement each other nicely, and the details which they have left untold or undeveloped are supplied by the monumental work of Faillon, "Histoire de la Colonie Française dans la Nouvelle-France," of which, however, only three quartos have appeared, and the still later volumes of Sulte, "Histoire des Canadiens-Français," now in process of periodical publication. Among minor works or monographs restricted to certain periods, I may mention with praise Bedard's "Histoire de Cinquante Ans," Turcotte's history of "Le Canada sous L'Union," an epoch stretching from the union of the two old Provinces in 1841 to the broad era of Confederation in 1867, and the history of the rebellion in 1837-38 by L. O. David. M. David has also produced quite a number of biographies of eminent men, ecclesiastical and lay, written in a fluent, agreeable style and a rare spirit of impartiality. The chief of French-Canadian biographers is, however, the Abbé Casgrain, whose life of the Venerable Mother of the Incarnation is sufficient to establish any writer's fame. But the Abbé has by no means contented himself with that work, and I may as well state here that this prolific and elegant writer has published with success a number of volumes of light literature, descriptive of the legends and traditions of the old Quebec district. He deservedly ranks as one of the best pens in the province. Another important contribution to biography is "Les Canadiens de L'Ouest," by Joseph Tassé, which won for its author a place in the Royal Society. This work has special interest from the fact that it chronicles the adventures of many of those remarkable Canadians who first explored the Great West from Detroit to Vancouver, and abounds with incidents that cannot be found elsewhere. The Abbé Desmazures has contributed a number of interesting biographical and historical sketches notably on Colbert and Faillon. Another work of inestimable value is "La Généalogie des Familles Canadiennes," by l'Abbé Tanguay which is a perfect storehouse of useful reference. Of other detached biographies the number runs into the scores, and of course I am precluded from naming them.

### III.

#### POETS.

And now the poets. Here French Canada can afford to smile in the assurance that she will never sink into oblivion, *caret quia vate sacro*. This department is well stored, and with works of superior excellence. The limits of my paper, barely allowing of enumeration, will not admit of analysis, and much less of criticism, and hence I will not stop to justify the opinion that no country of its size or duration of intellectual life can point to a higher record in the realms of verse. The Canadian French are fond of music and song, a gay of temperament, particularly susceptible of the tender passion, greedy of adventure, and keenly imaginative. All these qualities point to a thirst for the poetical element, and the want has been abundantly supplied. The roll is a lengthy one of those who have voiced the aspirations of their countrymen, sung of their joys and sorrows, celebrated their glories, described the simple life of their village homes, and interpreted the meaning of their destinies. They are the two Garneaus, father and son, Lenoir, Fiset, Chauveau,

Donnelly, Prudhomme, Marchand, Poisson, Routhier, Chapman and Lajoie. The latter has immortalized himself by a single ballad, "Un Canadien Errant," just as Sir George Cartier would be remembered by his "O Canada, Mon Pays, Mes Amours," even if he had not been one of the Fathers of Confederation. Blain de St. Aubin has also written many charming songs, set to music by himself. Among the poets of a higher flight, or who have produced more ambitious works, I give the first place, after much reflection, to Cremazie. He was a man of creative genius who would have made his mark in any country, and had circumstances allowed him to cultivate his great talents in quietude of mind, he would have written poems of sublime worth. As it is, barring a few weak lines, here and there, which he never had the heart to revise, his "Vieux Soldat," "Drapeau de Carillon," and "Les Morts," are perfect and stir the soul like the blare of clarions. Cremazie deserves a monument at the hands of his countrymen, and that monument ought to be a national edition of his works. Following closely is Fréchette, a poet in the loftiest sense of the term, and still in the maturity of his powers. He has done his full share toward spreading the knowledge of his country abroad, by winning from the French Academy the Monthyon Award, an honor somewhat equivalent to that of the Oxford University Prize Poem. Cremazie is the Hugo; Fréchette, the Lamartine of Canada. The Beranger is Sulte. This poet is, perhaps, more distinctively national than any of the others, because he confines himself to the songs of the people. His "Patineuse" is a little gem. Lemay has written a number of long poems, but in my opinion, the best of them is his translation of "Evangeline." You will doubtless smile when I venture the statement that some of the lines are an improvement on the original, but I am happy to add that Longfellow himself concurred in this view. At least one clergyman has not deemed it derogatory to cultivate the muse in the intervals of his parochial ministrations, and it is some satisfaction to be able to say that he is almost as good a poet as he is a faithful pastor. "Au Foyer de mon Presbytère," by the Abbé Gingras, is a dainty little volume, by no means faultless indeed, chiefly through lack of revision, but containing many tender and striking passages, with a novelty of treatment such as might be expected from the heart of a celibate priest.

It is perhaps owing to the general disapproval of the clergy that, notwithstanding their taste for the theatre and the natural histrionic gifts of the people, the French writers of Canada have not cultivated dramatic composition. The only plays of any note that I can find are a tragedy written by Gerin-Lajoie in his youth for Nicolet College, the "Papi-neau" and "L'Exilé," of Fréchette, and two or three comedies of a very superior order by Marchand.

#### IV.

#### NOVELISTS.

After the poets naturally come the novelists. Here again the field is wide and it has been well cultivated. As was to be expected, the historical romance predominates, that being one of the most efficient means of popular instruction and entertainment in a sphere that is so particularly rich as are the annals of New France. Every variety of picturesque material is at hand. There is the era of discovery and settlement—Cartier, Champlain, Maisonneuve; that of heroic resistance to the Iroquois through a hundred

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years of warfare—Dollard and Vercheres; that of daring adventure in the pathless wilds—Joliet and Lasalle; that of apostleship and martyrdom—Brebœuf, Lallemand and Jogues; that of diplomacy and administration—Talon, the great disciple of Colbert; that of military glory—Tracy and the lion-heart Frontenac; that of debauchery and corruption—Bigot and Penan; that of downfall and doom—Montcalm and Levis. Canadians ought to be proud of such a history, and it is no wonder that their romancers should take pleasure in describing its varied scenes. The venerable DeGaspé may be said to have led the van in this department with “*Les Anciens Canadiens*,” a work of absorbing interest, in spite of its occasional diffuseness. He was followed by Marmette, who has published three or four historical novels of more than ordinary merit, “*L’Intendant Bigot*” being particularly worthy of mention. “*Une de Perdue, Deux de Trouvées*” by DeBoucherville deals, in its second part, with the events of 1837, and gives a graphic picture of the battle of St. Denis. The destruction of L’Acadie, “Home of the happy,” and the banishment of its faithful inhabitants form the subject of Bourassa’s “*Jacques et Marie*,” a work which I have always regarded as altogether superior in its class, notwithstanding frequent traces of hurried composition. It contains pages of admirable coloring, and such richness of style as to induce regret that this gifted man should have had his mind diverted to other branches of art.

In other and lighter forms of romance I have two or three names to signalize. Chauveau’s “*Charles Guérin*” is a sweet picture of *habitant* life, which has retained its charm of freshness, although dating back some thirty years. Another masterpiece that is destined to live is the “*Jean Rivard*” of the late Gérin-Lajoie, a description of pioneer life in the Eastern Townships or Bois Francs, of renewed interest in our time when the tide of French colonization is rolling to the fertile plains between the Ottawa and the foot of the Laurentian Mountains. I may mention, too, a series of short domestic stories by Charles Leclere, a young writer full of promise, who was cut off in his prime.

## V.

## ESSAYISTS AND CHRONIQUEURS.

A favorite species of composition, drawn from the practice of old France, is the *Chronique*. This is a slight form of the essay in which topics of current interest are touched off in an airy, jaunty style. Many of our writers have distinguished themselves therein; this being specially true of Casgrain, Routhier, Legendre and Montpetit. Routhier has produced much of late in other departments, and, if he continues, will establish a most enviable reputation. Both Montpetit and Legendre wield a graceful pen that writes the French language to perfection. But the prince of *chroniqueurs* is Fabre, a true Parisian in temperament, possessed of that subtle electrical *esprit*, which is supposed to impregnate the atmosphere of the boulevards. Here is a man who has not done justice to himself, inasmuch as he does not produce half enough. Buies, belonging to the same school, is another writer of exceptionally brilliant talent, now caustic in satire, then rollicking in humour, and at times tenderly pathetic. In a somewhat different vein, because rather inclined to melancholy, is Faucher de St. Maurice, unquestionably one of the chief glories of French-Canadian literature. Faucher is a careful, conscientious writer, and every work of his is worth attentive perusal. His sketches of travel—and he has travelled much—

are full of entertainment, while his volume of sketches entitled "A La Brunante" has some ravishing bits. M. Faucher enjoys the distinction of having been elected an honorary member *La Société des gens de lettres de France*. Among essayists of a more serious cast, the lead is taken by Oscar Dunn, whose "Dix Années de Journalisme" contain a number of important studies on moral and philosophical subjects, written in a fine judicial spirit and the purest French. This purism is further manifested in the "Glossaire Franco-Canadien," a little book in which the author catalogues and accounts for terms that are exclusively French-Canadian. The world of Canadian literature lately suffered a great loss by the death of Larue, one of the most dashing and captivating writers of Quebec, and it is to be regretted that Dr. Taché has not continued to put forth such legends, sketches and studies as rendered his earlier career so brilliant. A number of the best essayists may be found among the clergy, such as Messrs. Desaulniers, Raymond, Desmazures and Lacasse. I shall not trespass on your time by enumerating the large class of miscellaneous writers, but content myself with naming the well-written dissertations of Siméon Lesage on agricultural matters, the useful volume of Paul de Cazes on the resources of the Province and Dominion, the admirable work of Ernest Gagnon, on the "Chants Populaires du Canada," the memoirs of Meilleur and Chauveau on the progress of education in French Canada, and the descriptive studies of LeMoine, eclipsed, as they are, however, by his numerous works in English.

## VI.

## JOURNALISTS.

It is well known that in France journalism is a training school of literature, through which most of the chief writers have passed at some epoch of their career. It is the same in Canada. Our French countrymen are certainly not very general readers, yet the number of their newspapers is greater than is usually supposed, while in some branches of higher journalism they are somewhat ahead of ourselves. There are four French dailies in Montreal, four in Quebec, which is quite up to the Toronto scale. There are three papers in Three Rivers, two in St. Hyacinthe, two in St. Johns, on the Richelieu, and one in every little town of the Province. Furthermore, they have one monthly literary review, which is more than we can boast of, one illustrated weekly, three or four literary weeklies, and such popular periodicals as the *Soirées Canadiennes* where authors deposit their fugitive pieces. It will be allowed that this is not at all a bad showing. What detracts considerably from the character of many of these journals in their intensely personal style of polemics, but that appears to be in the habits of the people and they seem to enjoy it. On the other hand, it must be said that some of the writers on the French press rank among the best in the country. DeCelles wields a vigorous pen and is master of a broad style. He has many of the qualities of Veuillot. Provencher is possessed of a grim humour and is a powerful writer withal. Dansereau left a profound trace during his career in journalism. Then there are Trudel, Bienvenu, Gélinas, Beaugrand, Demers and Tremblay in Montreal; Tarte, Desjardins, Tardivel, Langelier, Levasseur, Bouchard, Huot and one or two others in Quebec.

The French population may be set down, in round numbers, at a million. Of this number, taking the usual average of ten per cent., not more than 100,000 can be said to

be educated, and of the latter—according to another estimate—only a fourth, or 25,000, form what is called the reading public. In view of these figures, the literary vitality of our French writers is a very noticeable fact, and deserves all the attention that we have endeavored to give it.

## VII.

## WANTS.

In this necessarily rapid review, and going over so many names, I have naturally chosen the best, and, as naturally, my opinion is cast in the mould of praise. It does not follow, however, that I am insensible to certain deficiencies of French-Canadian education and literature. Of course I have no time even to touch upon these, but I may say generally that, if the present harvest is destined to be continued, a thorough cultivation of the soil will be necessary. A strong classical education will have to be insisted upon. A smattering of Latin and an utter ignorance of Greek, together with a mere elementary knowledge of the exact sciences, are not conducive to the evolution of solid intellectuality. Literature is a flower. There are single flowers and double flower. The former are the offshoots of nature; the latter are the creation of science allied to æsthetic tastes. I naturally have no mission to touch on the vexed question of the Laval University, but I am safe not to be gainsaid when I affirm that one real *universitas*, in the good old scholastic sense, is quite ample for the needs of a million people. The other colleges should be merely affiliations, not rivals, and they should ground their pupils thoroughly in the humanities. The intermediate or grammar schools should be much stronger than they are, supplying a need for that large class which circumstances debar from an university curriculum. I am happy to know that these views are concurred in by the best educators in the Province, and that a combined effort is being made by the Catholic Board of Public Instruction to bring about this consummation. If such should prove the case to the extent that I anticipate, the future of the literature of French Canada will be brighter than is its present, and what is now a promising child may grow into a benign and exuberant giant.

## VIII.

## SOURCES OF LITERARY INSPIRATION.

The field, indeed, has been only partially cultivated. The primeval wood is just beginning to be cleared. The possibilities are immense and the sources of inspiration extraordinary. I have already alluded to the background of history—of daring, devotion and heroism such as few countries can boast of. Then there is our grand, our magnificent nature—the unpruned forests, the surging mountains, the roaring floods, the thunderous cataracts and the sublime sweep of billowy prairies rolling to the setting sun. The St. Lawrence has been and will be an unfailing source of inspiration to Canadians. There is no nobler river—girdling one-half of a continent. Rising in the great lakes, tumbling in foam at Niagara, murmuring around the cradles of the Thousand Islands, bearing the fleets of the world from the old Pointe à Callières at Montreal, throbbing with conscious pride at the base of Cape Diamond, it preserves its wonderful identity amid infinite variety, till it dashes into the sea at the breakwater of Anticosti.

There is another mine of inspiration in the domestic and social life of the people. The *habitant* is a type in himself. The French village is like nothing else on this continent. If you take the male character, you have a range from the *coureur des bois* and the raftsmen, to the village notary and the omnipotently beneficent *curé*. If you take the female model, you have the incipient maiden, with the white veil of the first communion flowing from her blond hair, to the joyous factory girl decked out as a Dolly Varden, and the rustic Evangeline homeward from church returning with God's benediction upon her.

The climate of French Canada is hard; the winters are long, but there is literary inspiration even there. indeed, winter must and does enter largely into the framework of French-Canadian romance and song. We may take this picture as including all the elements. A hunter is out in pursuit of the wily moose; he tramps over miles of untrodden snow, from the first streak of dawn till the last gleam of sunlight lingers in the western sky. The beast is weary; he is weary. But the weaker yields to the stronger—*la raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure*—and the broad antlers are bowed in the submission of death. Dragging his trophy behind him, in a last effort of exhausted nature, the hunter turns his face homeward. The way is long and the snow is deep, but the faint heart buoys itself in the hope of a reward from wife and children. A turn in the road, and from afar the squares of yellow light beam from the well-known window panes. The slender bridge is crossed, the pathway to the familiar threshold is traversed, the welcome door is opened and—all is over. Here is my Canadian picture—a hard day's work in the cold, cold world and, at night, rest in the arms of love, beside the warm fireside of Home.

